DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 158 356 CS 502 226

AUTHOR Schneider, Michael J.
TITLE A Classroom Excercise in Persuasion.
PUB DATE Dec 77
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (63rd, Washington, D.C., December 1-4, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Composition Skills (Literary); Higher Education; Logic; *Persuasive Discourse; Speech Communication; *Teaching Techniques
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Response

ABSTRACT

In an exercise designed to make students aware of their tendencies to examine a persuasive message from a single perspective, students were given a "Saturday Review" letter urging opposition to a bill. They were then told it was a hoax. Next, they were asked to specify "believable" and "unbelievable" features of the letter. Generally, they picked out many "unbelievable" and few "believable" features. The students were then presented with the actual effects of the letter, which clearly indicated that many people believed it to be true. With this information, students were asked to think about why their responses differed so greatly from the "real" responses; finally, they were told to examine the letter again to see what features made it believable. This exercise makes students more aware of their tendencies to examine a persuasive message from their own frame of reference and it helps illustrate the importance of audience analysis. (FL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED158356

A CLASSROOM EXCERCISE IN PERSUASION

Competitive paper presented at the Speech Communication Association meeting in Washington D.C., December, 1977

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Michael J. Schneider

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Michael J. Schneider
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

The help of Darold Vredburg in adapting this excercise to the Secondary school level is gratefully acknowledged.

CS502226

Persuasion, we know, is a complex process. Part of that complexity is harbored in the nature of the audience One important goal of a beginning course in persuasion should be able to develop the students' understanding of the complexities of persuasion and the malleability of a given message. He/she should understand that the frame of reference which an audience imposes on a message will do much to determine the effects of the message. The student should also understand that different audiences will impose different interpretations on messages because different audiences have different frames of reference.

Traditional pronouncements and exercises can achieve the goals on an intellectual level. That is, it is not difficult to get students to spit back information on an exam about the different ways audiences respond to messages. But meeting our goals on this level is not always enough. While he can understand that different groups of people interpret messages differently, man's egocentrism sometimes makes it difficult to avoid the misconception that there is only one way of interpreting a given set of messages. Thus, students may learn that audiences often respond differentially to the same message, but they will not necessarily be in a good position to apply this knowledge unless they also learn something about their tendencies to envision only one interpretation of a message.

It seems to me that the best way to make students aware of their tendencies to examine a persuasive message from a single perspective is to set up a situation in which these tendencies surface. Next an alternative intepretation of the same message should be presented

so that students can see that others might see the message differently and their interpretation was not the only "realistic" one.

In a unit devoted to audiences, then, I would include initial readings and class discussions about the nature of audiences. The way in which audiences respond to messages would, of course, be discussed. Then I would present students with an assignment designed to make them aware of their tendencies to think in terms of single interpretations. The exercise also helps to make the idea of different audience perspectives "come alive."

The exercise takes one class period. It begins when I provide students with copies of the persuasive message, a letter published in the Saturday Review on April 3, 1971.[2] The letter was signed "K. Jason Sitewell" and it urged readers to oppose a bill which would "abolish all privately owned parks of more than 150 acres that are used by fewer than 150 persons per day averaged out over a week."[1] I have the students read the letter in class and then I inform them that the letter was a hoax. It was an April Fools Day joke perpetrated by Norman Cousins, the former editor of Saturday Review. The author of the letter argued that the bill in question was secretly designed to destroy the sport of golf. "Sitewell" claimed that the congressman who sponsored the bill had a "psychotic hatred" for golf because both his father and grandfather died in sand traps from "exasperation" or shock (the father perished after hitting nineteen balls into a pond).

After I inform the students that the letter was a hoax I give them the task of specifying features of the letter which make it seem believable and features which make it seem unbelievable. They work on this task in groups then for about thirty minutes. Generally, students will pick out many "unbelievable" features of the bill since I provided them with the information that the letter was a hoax. Many groups have reported that they could not find anything that was believable and several students have made comments to the effect of "the letter is so absurd that no one could believe it."

Once reports of the group discussions have been completed, I provide students with information about the actual effects of the bill. These effects were discussed by Wilbur Schramm in his newest book Men, Messages, and Media. Schramm writes:

> The most extraordinary things happened. It is reported that emergency meetings were held by governing boards of a number of golf clubs. A leading golf magazine reprinted the Sitewell letter under the heading 'A Frightening Bill.' The wife of a federal judge telephoned the Saturday Review for reprints of the letter to send to her husband and some of his friends who were away on a golf holiday. The editor of the Saturday Review reports that at least a dozen congressmen or their assistants telephoned to say that H.R. 6142 was becoming a primary target in the mail from their constituents. So it went, until the Wall Street Journal, chuckling up and down its front page, revealed the hoax and the Saturday Review itself confessed.[3]

After the students receive this information, I ask them to think about why their responses were different from the responses reported by Schramm. Clearly the students experience the letter from a different frame of reference than the people who believed the letter. The students know it is inaccurate. Those people who responded to the letter were

those who were very involved in the sport of golf. I then give students the task of examining the letter again to see what features of the letter make it seem believable. This time, students do better than they did the first time around. They will list more features of the letter which lend "believability" to it.

I suggest that the reason students initially did not provide many reasons for believing the letter is that they acted as if the frame of reference which they were provided with was the only frame of reference from which to interpret the letter. When asked to analyze the persuasive appeals of the letter, they use their own frames of reference as a guideline for analysis, rather than the frame of reference of members of the audience to whom the letter was addressed. They are able to provide a fairly complete analysis of the persuasive message only after they know the effects of the letter. Ideally, students should be able to make good judgments about the way audiences will respond to messages before the effects of the appeal are known—foresight is generally more valuable than hindsight. This exercise should make students more aware of their tendencies to examine a persuasive message from their own frames of reference. It should help illustrate the importance of audience analysis. In fulfilling these goals, it should improve the students' abilities to analyze persuasive communications.

[1]K. Jason Sitewell, "A Call to Defect H.R. 6142, "Saturday Review (April 3, 1971), p. 31.

[2]The letter and its effects are described in Wilbur Schramm, Men, Messages, and Media: A Look at Human Communication (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973) p. 192-3.

[3]Ibid. p. 193.

Worksheet for "A Call to Defeat H.R. 6142"

In this letter to the editor of Saturday Review, Sitewell's main point is that a congressional bill, H.R. 6142, should be defeated because it is secretly designed to destroy the sport of golf. Sitewell has two main arguments. First, he tries to show how the bill would eliminate the nation's golf courses. Second, he tries to show that A.F. Day has secret reasons for wanting to do away with the sport. Sitewell concludes the letter by appealing to members of his audience to take action against the bill.

I. Use of Evidence and Reasoning

A. What kind of reasoning does Sitewell use when he tries to show how the bill would eliminate the nation's golf courses?

Is this reasoning effective? Does it show that the bill would eliminate golf?

B. What kind of evidence does Sitewell use to try to show that A.F. Day has secret reasons for wanting to do away with the sport of golf?

Does Sitewell provide enough evidence to support his argument?

What aspects of the evidence makes it seem believable to you?

What aspects of the evidence make it seem unbelievable?

II. Credibility

A. Is Sitewell successful in his attempt to destroy Congressman Day's credibility? Why or why not?

B. List as many factors as you can which seem to increase K. Jason Sitewell's credibility

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

C. List as many factors as you can which seem to decrease K. Jason Sitewell's credibility

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

III. Audience Analysis

A. How would you describe the audience to whom this letter was addressed?

B. Do you think people were persuaded by the letter? Why or why not?

C. Do you think anyone was persuaded enough to take action to oppose the bill?